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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: An Estimate of the Situation and Prospects in Laos

SUMMARY

1. Since the tenuous "cease fire" in Laos and the opening of the Geneva Conference in May, the situation among the internal factions in Laos has changed significantly in favor of the Communist element. The territory responsive to the authority of the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) of Prince Souvanna Phouma and General Phoumi has dwindled; the political and military strength of the neutralist Souvanna Phouma/Kong Le element has been curtailed; and the Souvannavong/Pathet Lao Communist element has made considerable progress toward consolidating its military and political position in north and central Laos, and has increased its military strength in south Laos to the point where a viable north-south partition of

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the country is well beyond the military capabilities of the RLG. These developments have increased greatly the capabilities of the Communist element to dominate the future situation in Laos, either in a military struggle or in a political competition under a "neutralist" government.

DISCUSSION

2. The authority of the RLG is now limited to a number of towns and their environs along the Mekong River. These include Luang-Prabang -- which is accessable only by air and is cut off from much of the produce of the surrounding countryside -- Vientiane, Thakhek, Savannakhet, and Pakse. The Communist and neutralist elements control the main population centers and lines of communication (rivers and roads) in most of the rest of the country. Each side has sympathizers, outposts, and guerrilla units in areas under the nominal control of the other.

3. Despite US training efforts and the continued influx of equipment and supplies, the capabilities of the RLG armed

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forces have not increased significantly. In the numerous skirmishes which have taken place since the cease fire the RLG troops have shown little will to fight. They still abandon positions when brought under mortar or artillery fire. RLG logistical support of its troops in the field continues to be poor and the field commanders are for the most part indecisive and weak. Only the Meo tribesmen have shown any dependability in combat and their guerrillas are harassing lines of communication in the Xieng Khouang area despite strong military counter measures by the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces. For these reasons, the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces will probably undertake a major effort in the near future to eliminate the Meo as an effective resistance group.

4. The Kong Le forces, now estimated at about 6,000 men, have lost some of their earlier spark and dedication. The remnants of Kong Le's hard core followers of the original second Parachute Battalion have been widely scattered through his new battalions which are made up largely of new recruits, PDJ's and Pathet Lao. There has

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been some demoralization among the Kong Le troops as the result of short rations and supplies, lack of pay, and encroachments by Pathet Lao and Viet Minh advisors and cadres.

5. The Pathet Lao troops have been augmented by local recruitment and reinforcement by Viet Minh specialists (logistics, communications, artillery, engineers, and tactical advisors). We estimate Pathet Lao troops to number about 15,000. In all there are probably about 3500 Bloc personnel in Laos assisting the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces. The Pathet Lao have improved their tactical positions on the ground. With Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese assistance their logistical situation has been improved. The airlift has continued through the cease fire, probably at about half the rate it maintained before the monsoon season began in May. Resupply by truck from North Vietnam has continued through the rainy season, accounting for most of the tonnage being brought into Laos. We believe that the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces could seize the towns remaining in RLG hands in a few days with the supplies now in their stockpiles.

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6. There is some geographic division of authority between the Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces, but we do not know the precise breakdown. It is reasonably certain that the Pathet Lao are in charge of Sam Neua province. Kong Le troops are much in evidence around Xieng Khouang, but it is unlikely that the province is under their administrative jurisdiction. Most likely, the Kong Le troops, which are dispersed guarding lines of communication or engaging the Meos, attempt to exert authority in the areas in which they are stationed.

7. The Communist elements have been waging an extensive campaign of propaganda, political indoctrination and recruitment aimed at converting the population, installing Communist or pro-Communist local leaders. This campaign, along with demands levied upon the villages for food and labor, has created dissatisfaction, but in general has probably been successful, and Communist grass-roots control has increased and expanded.

8. The Souvanna/Kong Le neutralist elements have become increasingly suspicious of Pathet Lao intentions, and there is almost certainly considerable friction between the neutralist and Communist elements. The neutralist elements have

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been attempting to prevent the Communist element from achieving a dominant position, militarily and politically, in the countryside. However, the neutralists do not have the resources, the political cadres, or the experience to match the Communist effort. Kong Le's military forces, heavily outnumbered and dependent upon a Communist-operated supply system, are being squeezed out of power and influence, and they are so scattered that they probably could not regroup for any independent tactical purpose. The efforts of the neutralist elements to maintain an independent military and political position have probably been further weakened by Souvanna's prolonged trips abroad. Some of his supporters in the government set up at Xieng Khouang are capable of advancing or protecting the interests of the neutralist elements against the Souphanouvong/Pathet Lao group and the Hloc personages on the scene.

9. The position of the Souvanna/Kong Le neutralist element is now seriously undermined. It has no independent political apparatus and its military position is weak in relation to either the Phoumi or the Pathet Lao forces. It is almost

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completely dependent upon the Pathet Lao and the Viet for communications, transportation, logistical and financial support. We think it highly unlikely, therefore, that Souvanna could agree to any political settlement which was not fully acceptable to the Communist element. If Souvanna were to become Prime Minister in a coalition government, he would probably try to maintain a neutralist position and to reduce his near total dependence upon the Communists. Control of the government would give him some sources of independent strength he does not now have. However, the Communists would continue to consolidate their political and military strength in the countryside, and they could bring very strong pressures against him. It is unlikely that the Boun Oum/Phoumi element would be willing to provide Souvanna the support he would need to resist these Communist pressures. Consequently, a coalition government under Souvanna might at first appear to be holding a neutralist course, but we believe that over a period of time the growth of Communist strength would render Souvanna's control over the policies and attitudes of the Laotian government ineffective.

10. Since the "cease fire" the Communist side has increased substantially its strength in South Laos, to a point where a

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viable north-south partition of the country is well beyond the military capabilities of the NLF. At present, there are probably about 5,500 Pathet Lao troops south of Route 9 (about the 17th parallel). Except for the Mekong valley towns and a few isolated outposts in the interior, they have preempted NLF authority in south Laos. This move was probably intended to render impractical an effort by Ngo Dinh Diem and Phoumi to "partition" Laos. The Communist side now controls that part of south Laos most significant to the North Vietnamese campaign against the Diem government in South Vietnam.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

ARMIN MEYER
Acting Chairman

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